

# Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

## Virtual “Treatments” Can Be Real-World Deceptions

Washington, D.C. — Unscrupulous marketers are using cyberspace to peddle “miracle” treatments and cures to vulnerable consumers. Many of their ads, which feature exotic potions and pills, special curative diets, or “newly discovered” treatments, contain questionable claims about the effectiveness and safety of these products or services. So says the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which found the misleading or deceptive ads while surfing the Internet.

Misleading offers for products and treatments for heart disease, cancer, AIDS, diabetes, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and other medical conditions could be costly in several ways, according to the FTC. Consumers could lose their money and increase their health risk, especially if they delay or forego proper medical treatment. The FTC advises consumers to consult their doctor, pharmacist, other healthcare professional, or public health organizations before purchasing any product or treatment with a claim that sounds too good to be true.

The FTC cautions consumers who have a serious or chronic illness to be wary as they consider ads for products or services to treat their conditions — whether the pitches are made on the Internet, television or radio or in newspapers, magazines, or brochures — and to ask themselves one very important question: If a medical breakthrough really has occurred in the treatment of a serious illness, would the news be announced first in an ad?

How can you tell if a advertising claim for a “miracle” health-related product is likely to be phony, exaggerated, or unproven? The FTC says these tip-offs generally signal a rip-off:

- phrases like “scientific breakthrough,” “miraculous cure,” “exclusive product,” “secret formula,” and “ancient ingredient.”
- use of “medicalese” — impressive terminology to disguise a lack of good science.
- case histories from “cured” consumers claiming amazing results. Their testimonials also imply that their experience is typical for consumers using the product or service. When you see a testimonial, ask for proof of its ‘typical’ nature.
- a laundry list of symptoms the product cures or treats.
- the latest trendy ingredient touted in the headlines.
- a claim that the product is available from only one source, for a limited time.
- testimonials from “famous” medical experts.
- a claim that the government, the medical profession or research scientists have conspired to suppress the product.

If you have a complaint about a supposed medical product or service, file it with the FTC through the online complaint form at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) or by calling toll-free 1-877-FTC-HELP (382-4357). Although the Commission cannot resolve individual problems for consumers, it can act against a company if it sees a pattern of possible law violations.

For more information about how to identify fraudulent health product and treatment claims, visit the FTC online at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) — click on Consumer Protection.